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Wednesday, September 01, 2004

## Popularity of poker-style game has officials advising Virginians about Texas hold 'em

"About six months ago we started getting inquiries about Texas hold 'em," the director of the Virginia Department of Charitable Gaming said.

By [Lindsey Nair](#)  
981-3341  
The Roanoke Times

[Lindsey.Nair@roanoke.com](mailto:Lindsey.Nair@roanoke.com) 981-3334

The card game that was under way at the Salem Moose Lodge when it was raided by special agents last week has been increasing in popularity across the state over the past few months, officials said.

It might be the Texas hold 'em tournaments televised on ESPN that are drawing attention to the game, said Clyde Cristman, director of the Virginia Department of Charitable Gaming. Whatever the reason, the department is receiving multiple calls each week from residents asking how the law applies to the poker-style game.

"About six months ago we started getting inquiries about Texas hold 'em," Cristman said. "We've recently been getting about three or four calls a week."

Texas hold 'em is a game where each player is dealt two cards and the dealer then proceeds, in between rounds of betting, to deal more cards face up on the table. Finally, there is a "showdown" where players reveal the hands they have made using their two "pocket cards" in combination with the cards on the table.

Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control agents conducting an undercover investigation of the Moose Lodge on Thompson Memorial Drive executed a search warrant there Thursday.

According to the warrants and ABC officials, agents found 35 to 50 people playing Texas hold 'em at the lodge. The participants had each paid \$60 to play and received \$50 in chips, with the house keeping the rest. Winners of the tournament received a cash prize.

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In Virginia, gambling is illegal, with few exceptions. The Code of Virginia defines gambling as making, placing or wagering money in exchange for the chance to win a prize. Even if the house does not take a cut, if the above conditions are met, the game is illegal.

In Virginia, exceptions to the illegal gambling law include the state lottery, bingo, raffles and duck races. Bingo, raffles and duck races are allowed only for charitable organizations and require a permit unless the organization conducting the games is exempt under the law.

Playing games of chance for money is generally permitted in private residences unless it becomes a common occurrence. For example, one should not hold a big poker game for money at his or her house every night.

"It's illegal to gamble in public, period, and it's illegal to run a gambling operation," said Roanoke County Commonwealth's Attorney Randy Leach.

Leach said Tuesday that he has met with the agent in charge of the Moose Lodge investigation, but no charges have been filed in connection with Thursday's search. Investigators have a large amount of evidence that they are still sorting through and it may be some time before decisions are made as to how to proceed, he said.

"I'd say there are clearly a lot of people very interested" in Texas hold 'em, Cristman said. "People see it on TV and they say 'Hey, that's pretty cool.'"

He advises anyone who has a question about the gambling laws to call his or her local commonwealth's attorney or the Department of Charitable Gaming in Richmond at (804) 786-1681. The department also has a complaint line at (804) 786-0293.

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